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## The Baccante. By Wilson Davis

**T**HE cloistered court of the Boston Public Library demands for its central feature a work of sculpture. One enters the court at either of two doors placed respectively at the ends of the wall that separates it from the front halls and apartments of the building. In the photograph on the next page, the entrance to the left, as one faces the wall, is alone visible. The wall itself is broken by the projection into the court of the wall of the grand central staircase. In the center of this projecting wall, and leading from the landing of the staircase, is a balcony from which the court may be viewed. Against the remaining three walls is the beautiful arcaded promenade. The eye of the visitor who walks through this promenade does not naturally survey the whole court until one of the corners is turned, whereupon he is in that portion of the arcade which is really the front part of the court. A statue placed in the center of the court should properly face this portion of the promenade. It is difficult to imagine a more exquisite place for a sculptor's creation. In the soft light of the court it may be surveyed from every side and at exactly the proper distances. Sculpture, so often in modern times forced to thrust itself upon occasions, is here demanded.

**S**CUPTURE has need of the stimulus afforded by such occasions. If it is the great art that the greatest artists have considered, nay, shown, it to be, a certain gratitude should be entertained

toward the architecture that is auspicious to its productions. But it must be confessed that the art does not engage profoundly the modern mind; works of sculpture are produced, and people curiously survey them; but it can hardly be affirmed that many people are impelled to demand and study productions of the art by any real interest in or acknowledgment of the problems that are its basis. This fact is obvious enough to escape no one, yet it is regarded almost with complacency. It is easy to make succession a criterion of progress; to deck out as improvement, or, at least, as concomitant with improvement, a change in habitude is a temptation naturally seductive to the late-comers. Accordingly, it has even been slyly hinted that the decadence of sculpture may in some way be linked with an intellectual advancement of the race.

**A**S a matter of fact, sculpture was the supreme expression of Græco-Italic culture. Upon the scene of that culture came the rest of the European world much as a band of old satyrs might have come upon some nymphs in the forest. In the old Germanic mind the instincts of rapacity were to some degree tempered by admiration. The Germans contemplated the exquisite scenes of the Roman Empire with open-mouthed wonder, and the impulse to imitate, to build along the same lines, arose in their minds. But they never succeeded save in the most haphazard fashion, and the modern European world still contemplates that civilization without having attained its genius. Occasionally the moderns stumble upon some artistic principle only to find that it was continuously in the foreground of Greek consciousness.

**T**HE only facts in human life that can be called fundamental are physiological facts. The instinctive commotions in the body of a child, varied to accord with changing circumstances, are irrepressible, and when he weeps, laughs, shouts or gesticulates in the explosive manner that characterizes young life, he does so with scarcely any prevision; he sees a diminutive fellow and, ere he himself is aware, he has uttered a shout and gone through a violent spasmodic movement; he sees a rose upon a bush and, ere he has had time to think, his hand has stretched itself forth and plucked the rose; he would like to conform his acts with the behests of his mother, but he is continually troubled with the precedence of his bodily impulses. By and by the child learns to anticipate, and control begins; he learns to modify and soften each instinctive reaction; but while he will learn to impose limits, his experience will ever be dominated by physiological conditions that change as subtly as his moods, which are simply a cognizance of them, and that will cease only when his heart shall become silent and his viscera shall stiffen in death. The body is more potent than any philosophy that would abstract from it.

All the physiological conditions and changes, the cognizance of which a man calls his emotions, express themselves to the human eye in attitude, gesture, and arrangement of the features. Here is the sphere of sculpture; sculpture alone adequately portrays these facts; sculpture is the greatest of the arts. A series of statues of a man in critical situations would give his entire history. Only that people could originate and perfect sculpture for whom attitude had become a problem, the problem. The decadence of sculpture means the abandonment of the best

mode of presenting that problem and its solutions; it means the discarding of art where art is most needed, and where it can be most practical.

**A**N infinitely variegated field has accordingly realistic sculpture. But the field has hitherto been laudably limited by the desire of the sculptor to please. Of all artists the sculptor has most persistently cherished this motive; he always seeks to portray the ideal attitude for a given situation. Art links together all castes of men; both the beautiful and the ugly yield the same admiration to the works of Praxiteles; but not even an ugly man will tolerate an ugly statue. And what is ugly in sculpture? It is the portrayal of the ill-shaped body, and, if not ill-shaped, one whose attitude and expression are not the result of the mind that knows how to modulate and control attitude. There is no spectacle of which man is more intolerant than an uncontrolled body. With what stony gaze does he contemplate the man who is not master of his laughter, or who smiles spasmodically when there is no visible occasion! A series of statues, however, belonging to the same subject, like the acts of a drama, might open the door to a wider realism than has hitherto been attempted. Nor should it be forgotten that the statue that pleases is at the same time realistic.

**T**HE statue that has been offered to the Trustees of the Library, for the adornment of the court, is now famous, not only for its merits, but for the discussion that has arisen over them. No one, however, whether pleased or displeased with the Bacchante, will deny its realistic value.



**T**HE woman has risen to the joyous posture which the artist has selected by the graceful movement and swing of the dance; the muscles of her body do not show any of the strain that would be required to attain the poise by a single effort; the posture is evidently one of a series that in rapid succession make up the dance, and the grace and ease by which it is characterized make it almost impossible not to read motion into the figure; as one looks, one fairly sees the plastic flesh of a beautiful woman as, under the motion of the dance, it yields and swells and molds itself anew.

The whole attitude is the expression of that thrilling buoyance of vital force that is the occasional concomitant of perfect physical health unvexed by care. While there is no restraint upon the graceful exhibition of the gestures and expression that naturally accompany this condition, yet is there foreshadowed no violent gesture or loss of control. With the ecstatic condition of her own body, the attention of the Bacchante is mainly engaged. The senses of the Pheidian Athena are calmly cognizant of the world without. The mind of the Bacchante is dominated by emotions that are simply the cognizance of her own physiological condition. But, if the smile be checked and the eye become fixed, the whole attitude must be altered, and with the changed attitude will accord a radically different mood; the condition will have ceased to be Dionysian, it will have become Apollinian. Is sculpture to exclude from its domain the really Dionysian? Cannot the joyousness of a Bacchante be made as pleasing as the seriousness of Athena? Believe by beholding.

For truly with this joyousness, born of the South, the spectator is cheered and

delighted, the more so as he discerns the circumstances that harmonize with and adequately explain the woman's exhilaration. The present moment is for her a triumph over all causes of sluggishness and disease; her perfect body is in possession of all its powers; in these she glories, and she completely fascinates the attention with her graceful exhibition of them. Every other thought yields or contributes to this present exhilaration and triumph.

Triumphantly she holds aloft a cluster of grapes. Delicate suggestion! Autumnal nature has yielded again the delicious fruit. New wine is forthcoming, dark wine and sweet, the gift of a god! Beneficent wine! how it thrills my body, how it makes me free!

The infant that her left arm unconcernedly yet fondly encloses tells of another emotion, for thus she seems to say: Behold the child that I have snatched from its willing mother; even now it yearns for the fruit. Ah, its touch thrills me! O joy! I too am a woman like its mother! O happy hope!

Fair Bacchante! dull is he who cannot respond to your joy with the glad thought: Even as the vine triumphs over winter, so does human life survive decay; in the body of woman, life forms itself again; men wither and die, but life is immortal and grows not old.

And so, may the Bacchante remain to enliven the beautiful court; may the cooling water of the fountain continue to play about her lithe and joyous figure for many summers; and may the twentieth century be allowed to receive her as a token of the willingness of Bostonians of this decade to cherish a healthful gayety.



For Art and Joy go together, with bold openness, and high head, and ready hand — fearing naught, and dreading no exposure.

WHISTLER